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Date: Wed, 28 Nov 2001 11:09:35 -0800
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fyi... about ted

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> Date: Wed, 28 Nov 2001 18:10:41 -0800
> To: Danica Remy <remy@well.com>
> From: Chris Anderson <chris@ted.com>
> Subject: Re: Moving forward...
>
> Here's a recent article on TED for the trade press... It captures the spirit of the conference well, though he apparently isn't yet convinced it'll survive Wurman's departure!
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> - C
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> > TED: MEETING OF THE MINDS
> >
> > *The TED conference is the experience of a lifetime for the elite who attend, and some make it an annual pilgrimage. But will this February be the final climax?*
> >
> > A deep quiet settled over the auditorium as the tall, authoritative figure spoke to us. Sherwin Nuland, surgeon and author of *How We Die*, was making a very personal confession to a rapt audience of 800. His secret was that he had once suffered a nervous depression so severe that it had stymied his career at its peak. Forced to abandon the practice of surgery, he had finally been cured only with electro-convulsive therapy.
> >
> > Nuland was unburdening himself, he said, to relieve the feeling that he has been an impostor to his readers, who surely had assumed that he had written his books with an untroubled mind. He also hoped to show, he said, that "one can return from any adversity, and after losing everything, achieve redemption and resurrection."
> >
> > We gave him a long, standing ovation, and Nuland in his turn seemed

moved as he smiled back at us.

That dramatic emotional exchange was what one regular attendee calls one of the many "amazing moments" of a TED. The acronym is short for Technology, Entertainment and Design, the themes of an event which many feel is the greatest business conference of all.

For over a decade, this annual February meet in a plush, steep sided and cosy auditorium in Monterey has been an unadvertised multi-media circus and networking club for the creative and entrepreneurial stars of information technology, Hollywood and fields far beyond, including science and the arts.

While the Pacific sparkles nearby, the kingpins on stage celebrate their achievements, passions and latest ideas in simple talks or multi-media presentations for fellow billionaires, geniuses, creative movers and shakers and a crowd of executives and consultants that go along for the ride. Mingling during the coffee break upstairs in the convention center is a little like being at the Oscars. There are famous faces everywhere, and unlike other high powered events, they are there without their handlers. You can chat to them as easily as if you are a celebrity yourself.

Similar conferences may come and go, with many vanishing in last year's slowdown. TED, however, has long been a sellout. Last year, the admission rose to a forbidding $3500 for the four days, but TED was jammed as always, as if the dot.com crash in nearby Silicon Valley had never happened. There are other barriers, too. Last year, for my third participation in TED, it seemed preferable to drive up from Los Angeles, and not just to take in the scenery. Flying into Monterey in lashing rain and wind in late February can be a bucking bronco of a ride in a commuter plane. A year earlier, the pilot had announced over the intercom: "We're gonna try and make it, but I don't know whether we will!"

The barriers are worth hurdling, though. As one six times TEDster says, "To a lot of people this is the intellectual and emotional highlight of the year."

Intellectual, perhaps, but never academic in style. TED's parade of insights is typically unveiled by doers, even if they are often college professors. Gladiators of every arena of knowledge and skill have been on stage, sometimes more than once. AARP's Horace Deets, who has organized 33 million senior citizens into the Godzilla of Washington lobbies, is a regular. His latest topic was creativity as the saving grace of the last thirty years of life. The subject was a natural for TED, which celebrates creativity above all else.

MIT digital visionary Nicholas Negroponte who created the Media Lab at MIT, spoke at the first TED, in 1984, which featured the first public unveiling of the Macintosh computer, the Sony compact disc, and mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot explaining how to map coastlines with his newly discovered fractals. Daniel Boorstin, Librarian of Congress and historian of discovery and creativity, talked of the impact of wiring the world, and AI guru Marvin Minsky of the MIT Media Lab dismissed the right brain-left brain dichotomy ("garbage-there are four hundred brain centers"). Brain surgeon Keith Black and machine communicator Ray Kurzweil are both typical speakers who have pushed the envelope and turned their field upside down.

Black, for example, was encouraging as he foretold the end of invasive surgery when his experiments to get rid of tumors with microwaves and vaccines bear fruit. One slide showed a patient who had microwave brain 'surgery' only minutes before, smiling in bed surrounded by nurses, and ready to go home the same day. Kurzweil, a TED regular, was more alarming when he predicted nanorobots will invade our brains to raise our IQs and memories to superhuman levels, and that a $1 million computer will match the human brain by 2030. Last year he showed off Ramona, virtual reality rock star, which his new software made dance on screen in mimicry of Kurzweil's own movements. Ramona's voice was nasal, one had to admit, but this was just a kink typical of the fresh innovation at TED.

There are comedians, jugglers, and musicians as well, to break up the weighty thinking. Last year pianist Herbie Hancock played jazz alongside a young guitarist of great talent aged 13, Julian Lage, with vibraphonist Gary Burton. The boisterous Sinbad and a bemused Art Buchwald have appeared. David Blaine, the heavy-lidded magician who barely survived a week in a block of ice last year in Times Square, was in the audience in 2001. In one coffee break he was in the street outside. Surrounded by twenty pairs of eyes up close, he did a card trick for a middle aged man, then handed him back his watch. None of us had seen him remove it.

This year he will be on stage, probably levitating. If he does, it won't be any more magical than the annual conjuring trick pulled off by one remarkable figure at TED, the founder himself. Short, round and silverhaired, Richard Saul Wurman is the colorful engine and master of ceremonies of the four day bash and author of more than eighty books. His idiosyncrasies include boundless chutzpah, brilliant showmanship, and a genius all of his own-of which TED is the highest expression.

Last year Wurman typically allowed himself to be transformed into virtual reality by Kurzweil and made to dance absurdly well on screen. Part of his charm is that he will do anything to make TED better. Among memorable TED moments was the sight a few years ago of the Mars Rover straining to climb over the prone, rotund body of Wurman, who had lain down to act an unexplored mound. There was also the alarming scene last February when jugglers bounced heavy bowling balls through the TED chairman's legs as he straddled a small trampoline, wobbling. Wurman works hard to deliver the best experience and takes pride in it: "I don't need a third of the things I do that are a great deal of trouble to do. I do them anyway."

His own curiosity about all kinds of knowledge and the pioneers that expand it is the engine of what is essentially his personal creation. He rules on everything from the speaker lineup to the many goods provided by sponsors, which range from the super adjustable Steelcase Leap chairs for the overflow room to the bag of knick knacks distributed at every TED, which included a Palm V two years ago, and a Kodak digital camera last year. Then, in trademark baggy pants, cardigan and flowing scarf, he is the cheerleader and ringleader on stage throughout, kicking off bores before their twenty minutes is up, tearfully hugging the courageous, but otherwise keeping out of the way, simply urging his heavyweight achievers to be honest, sell nothing and voice their passion.

They almost always do, and the result goes beyond entertaining to emotionally uplifting and even inspiring, often provoking TEDsters into a soul

searching review of their own life choices. "It bumps you out of your rut," says a young consultant. "I came away feeling I had to find something to do with more purpose." A corporate public relations executive, veteran of six TEDs, notes that "To prove how smart you are is not why you are there. It is to share an emotional experience."

On one level the four days of presentation is a live manual for how to be a great innovator. Introductions of the new have ranged from the unveiling of the Macintosh computer at the first TED in 1984 to the deep sea discoveries of life forms once thought impossible - red tube worms which feed near volcanic sulphur plumes at 750 degrees Centigrade - at TED 2001. Each novelty is shown off by the originators themselves. Bill Gates spoke in 1992, chatting to LSD visionary Timothy Leary and saying "I wasn't prepared for the conference to be so profound". AOL's Steve Case and supreme Silicon Valley venture capitalist John Doerr are regulars. So is architect Frank Gehry, who calls TED "a real energy gorge." Last time, Gehry showed his crumpled foil model for a new building and remarked "This is really over the top. It won't look like this in the end, believe me. I am not that bad!"

That kind of disarming frankness is the style at TED. Another rule is show and tell, and not just through the multimedia equipment littering the stage, alongside colorful globes of Chihuli glass. Slides, videos, huge IMAX screenings and demonstrations of new technology in action have enlivened the stage with puppets, robots and even, at one point, Ace Greenberg of Bear Stearns doing card and handkerchief magic.

Beauitiful fashion model and Paralympic runner Aimee Mullins, a double amputee, tried new prosthetic leg designs on stage. Dean Kamen drove his gyroscopic wheelchair, which can climb steps and stand up tall enough for a user to reach a high supermarket shelf. The prototype of Danny Hillis's monumental clock, which will chime millennia and lengthen our perspective on our planetary future, stood grandly in the TED lobby in 2000. A year later, the clock's engineer Alexander Rose's gladiator robot dashed about on stage like a large metal crab.

Above all, speakers show off their personal passions. Disney studio head Jeffrey Katzenberg ran clips last February from his upcoming hit Shrek, while giving an enthusiast's history of computerized cartooning. Animal conservationist Jim Fowler showed us a rare King Cheetah with leopard-sized black ring spots. Courtney Sale Ross explained the trail blazing philosophy of her Ross School at the special TED on education in New York City in 1997. Junk-bond creator Michael Milken has described his personal war on prostate cancer and his cross country tour giving away $25,000 prizes to unknown star teachers. Gary Burton showed us how the creative process works for him on stage, as a kind of subconscious conversation with himself.

All of this bright conflagration of ideas, commitment and clout on stage is not what ignites TED for many, however. The combustion that attracts them is offstage--personal encounters with the speakers and other members of the audience, one of the smartest, wealthiest, and most responsive gatherings on the planet. Capitalists and creative types catalyze each other in the hallway and mealtime chatter. Ideas sparked and projects born in spontaneous brainstorming include

Wired magazine and Bill Gross's idealab!, the Internet startup incubator.
One measure of the TED crowd as a killer audience is that while participants pay through the nose the speakers all speak gratis. There is no fee, no air ticket, not even a hotel room, just a reservation. What they know, however, as humanistic documentary pioneer Albert Maysles, of *Salesman, Gimme Shelter* and *Grey Gardens*, puts it, is that "You address a group like that and anything can happen."

Wurman characteristically focuses on positive reinforcement. Naysayers are banished. Mutual back scratching is welcome. TED is a mutual admiration society, a support group for entrepreneurs of business and the mind, a Landmark Forum for top achievers. For creative people, it's nirvana. Used to having their ideas ignored or pushed aside at their companies, at TED they find them recognized, celebrated, and even financed. Wurman acts the father figure to his annual flock, enabling their liberation. In this he is revisiting his childhood. His father, a cigar executive baffled by his obsessive interests as a child, nevertheless bought him all the books he needed and even an Eames chair, when he became fascinated by chair design.

TED is imbued with Wurman's guiding principle in life, work at your own thing. A graduate with high honors in architecture from the University of Pennsylvania, he taught at universities from Cambridge to Princeton and UCLA. But his heart wasn't in it, he found. Eventually his administrative inattention got him fired as a college dean. Then he decided to follow his bliss, which turned out to be schooling himself and in the process, learning how to make knowledge palatable to others. Switching from the shaping of buildings to the design of information, his work apart from TED became a stream of guidebooks on topics ranging to major cities, covered in his popular Access Guides, to his most recent preoccupations, health and bringing up children. He is best known for his 1989 best seller *Information Anxiety*, a blueprint for navigating the information deluge according to the quintessential Wurman rule: *Follow your interest.* A new edition including the Web came out last year.

Also key to TED is Wurman's favored posture in seeking knowledge: humility. (HAH! - Chris) "I have always wanted to be smarter but probably my long suit is that I am not," he says. "My qualification is that I am an interested dumb shit." Ultimately, this may be Wurman's career legacy, his Socratic wisdom. For a spirit of childlike openness rather than arrogance empowers his exclusive event. "I think I give permission to people, " Wurman ruminates. "Permission to be interested in odd things and find the closure and the patterning between them." After all, he says "they see me fuck up all the time! They see me make fun of myself and other people making fun of me and telling stories about me. That is a very liberating thing."

That vulnerability is also how he attracts the best and the brightest, he claims. "People take pity on me because I am inept and obviously not that bright yet I want to do good work." But there is also a bulging Rolodex with whose help Wurman recruits speakers who have never heard of hi by asking friends of TED to drop a word in advance of his call. "I have no credibility," he avers. "Others say they really should come. I make use of that. I have a really nice network."

Inevitably, there are critics who grumble behind his back at his notorious highhandedness, and at the staff who usually refuse favors. But Wurman, who banned self-criticism from his repertoire long ago, isn't too worried. Artists are by nature and role relatively self-centered and Wurman obsessively moulds and tweaks TED like some 3D virtual reality sculpture. And like any true artist he doesn't do it for the good of the audience. "I do it because it's the right thing to do and the best way I know how to do it!" It's not arrogance, he says. "I believe in myself, in my own ignorance, and the joy of it, and understanding what it is not to understand. It is amazing to me, really amazing, I gotta tell you, to be allowed to have this journey."

Still, some marvel at the fact that while speakers are unpaid save for a few free tickets for guests at their sessions, Wurman's revenue can be counted by multiplying the entry ticket-$4000 next year- by over 800 attendees, several hundred of whom will be accommodated not in the comfortable theater but only in a "simulcast room" where the happenings on stage are piped in to large Sony LCD screens. Wurman points out people there can kibbitz while the talks go on, but there is a visible rush to fill seats in the main auditorium when people leave early. Meanwhile, sponsors who hope to speak at TED finance the evening buffets, and GM provides its latest Humvees or other vehicles for hands-on test drives on the first morning of TEDs.

It's a lot of money, Wurman agrees. But several competing but duller conferences, such as Agenda, charge $5000 or even more, he points out, and "it is a lot less than $15,000, which is what Davos (Economic Forum) charges." Indeed, most TEDsters feel he deserves his rewards. Warren Bennis of USC called TED "the most generous conference I have attended-generous ideas, generous people, and generous Wurman." Others simply admire his chutzpah. Architect Richard Kaplan laughs, "Ricky is a terrific promoter and a brilliant showman, and he gives a wonderful time to a lot of people. Then he takes home a million dollars!" The cash lets Wurman live in style in a large 126-year-old Newport mansion with gravel drive and relaxing $6.580 Knoll lounge chairs where he spends the rest of the year mostly producing books as his staff and family prepare the next TED.

Perhaps Wurman's cleverest promotion has been to ignore the press from the beginning. TED has never sought publicity or advertised and until recently was virtually ignored by the media. TEDsters are recruited by word of mouth without ads or promotion and the press has never been coddled or given press passes. In the last few years, however, the secret has leaked out and major magazines like Fortune and Wired have run the story, the writers wrestling to reconcile the riches of the experience with the robust vulgarity of the Wurman persona.

Ironically, the belated coverage arrived just in time for what may be a big change in the nature of TED. Wurman, having finished tweaking a perfectly running machine, has finally sold it off. Suddenly, TEDsters are worried that their annual recharging is in jeopardy, and outsiders face the prospect of having missed out forever. Why did he make the decision to abandon his baby? "It was time," he says, "for me to have a rest and get renewed."

The upcoming TED in 2002 will be the last one he will shepherd. After that, the new chairman will be an earnest, blonde Brit, Chris Anderson, whose Future

Network has been one of the great successes of magazine publishing in Britain, though lately collapsed by the ad recession. Having attended TED several times Anderson paid some $15 million in mostly cash to take over what has now become his main preoccupation. Wurman, however, while handing over the original TED to Anderson, will still be allowed to produce TED-MED, his medical spin off. The third is scheduled for 2003 in Providence, Rhode Island. The theme will be the understanding of health and well being.

But if Wurman is the soon-to-be-ripped-out heart of TED, and he will continue with spinoffs, won't the original TED dwindle and perhaps die off altogether? Not a chance, chorus the two men.

TED will go on as before, says Wurman, just directed by someone else's curiosity. "Mine is not necessarily the best. It just happens to be my slice of curiosity. I will give him the keys of the kingdom", he says, meaning his advice and the Rolodex.

The new chairman, whose staff edited a 80 page handbook at the last TED, seems likely to add his own slightly more cerebral spin. An Oxford educated Englishman who does not wear his ego on his sleeve, he may not push past the caution of strangers in quite the unstoppable style of Wurman, who likes to say "I only warm up on rejection. Being told no doesn't mean the same thing to me as to most people. Being rejected means it is time to ask them again!" But Anderson built a big magazine empire from scratch, and he reads and recommends books with an evangelical fervor. He is already tapping luminaries such as Steven Pinker, a cognitive researcher whose *How The Mind Works* he thinks is "wonderful. Read it! It changes your life!"

Anderson says that his inspiration is the flood of breakthrough ideas coming out. "When I was at Oxford in 1975 philosophy seemed very dull, almost no more than a language game. Now people such as Dan Dennett, Steven Pinker and Richard Dawkins are coming out with incredible stuff. We have gained confidence that we can actually figure out why we are the way are, why we feel what we feel and why we do what we do. That feels new to me."

To him the special appeal of TED is "Here is the real McCoy, The real people are five feet away from you, communicating what is important to them, and there is no intermediation. You are hearing it direct. That is very, very exciting. Most people at TED will never get another opportunity to spend so much time in the space of a few days either listening to or in direct conversation with some of the most remarkable people on the planet."

Anderson promises "an absolutely phenomenal roster of speakers" for TED 2003, whose post dot.com crash theme of rebirth, renewal and reinvention he devised before the World Trade Center attack and its aftermath. Speakers who rallied to the cause early include Jeff Bezos of Amazon, Malcolm Gladwell, Jay Walker founder of Priceline, Walter Mossberg of the Wall Street Journal, Danny Hillis, and to help as MC John Hockenberry of NBC, one of whose victories over his wheelchair is a brilliant sense of fun.

No doubt TED XII will sell out as usual despite the World Trade Center recession. The theme is the design of everything, from technology to humor to

sensuality to the chair to life. Shiny prototypes of cars, bikes and caravans from GM, BMW, Fiat, Harley, and Chrysler including a new Bambi AirStream will be parked in the simulcast room. Wurman promises "simply the greatest design conference that ever was."

After that it depends on Chris Anderson, who will program and chair the final morning. With luck the adventure will turn out for him as well as it did for Wurman, which is more than he ever hoped for.

"Absolutely, unequivocally more than I ever hoped from it or my life. Beyond any of my expectations."

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